

Highland Council Allied Health Professionals: Improvement Report

Developing Communication Skills in Early Years

Speech and Language Therapy: Scottish Attainment Challenge: January 2019

Situation:

The project aims to reduce the attainment gap that can be created by reduced language skills by embedding high quality adult-child interactions into every day practice and planning in the early stage in three identified Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) schools.

Speech and Language Therapy Support Practitioners (SLTSP) are working alongside staff in Nurseries in the three identified SAC schools under guidance from the Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) to deliver this project. The SLT team provide training, coaching and mentoring to staff in the settings.

Background:

The SAC is a Scottish wide initiative about achieving equity in education, with a particular focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap¹. Children's early vocabulary is a key early indicator of their future outcomes in education and beyond in terms of educational outcomes and health and wellbeing.² This project aims to reduce the attainment gap by increasing early language skills in all children in the early years settings in the three targeted schools. The project aims to do this by developing high quality adult-child interaction in the adults around the children and embedding these skills in the schools practice and ethos. There is a wealth of evidence that tells us that when adults interact with children using high quality adult-child interaction the children's vocabulary is more advanced. A recent study highlighted that the quality of the interaction with children, creating numerous back and forth interactive turns, rather than the number of words a child heard, led to an increase in children's language and development of the areas of the brain associated with language and communication³. In Highland we use Key Messages from the Words Up⁴ universal initiative to facilitate embedding of high quality adult-child interaction for all children in line with Allied Health Professionals Ready To Act⁵ transformational plan that has an ambition for every child receiving the best possible start in life.

Intervention:

Intervention focussed on providing training to all staff in the three settings followed by focussed modelling and coaching, including videoed feedback to enable self-reflection and change of practice.

Words Up 1 (stage 1)

Training provided information on the six key messages to use when interacting with children.

The Words Up: Early, 6 Key Messages for developing good quality adult-child interaction are:

- **Play and Talk Together:** *Adults need to plan for vocabulary and language learning and need to join children in play to add language to their experiences at the right time. In order to learn language children need to hear words and sentences repetitively from adults in context alongside their experiences.*
- **Quiet Time to Talk:** *Adults need to consider reducing distractions, particularly at times when they are expecting children to listen to and tune-in to language. Providing a quiet time to talk allows children the time to hear language and supports listening and attention.*
- **Face to Face:** *Adults need to be in a position where children can see their face. Being face-to-face allows children to see facial expression and body language which enhances communication.*
- **Pause and Wait:** *Adults are encouraged to pause for a count of up to 10 seconds, giving time for the children to process information and wait for the children to take a turn in the interaction. Adults need to know the type of interaction (e.g. facial expression, body language, speech) the child is likely to use.*

- **Be Careful With Questions:** *Questions don't teach language; language is mainly learnt through adults using comments alongside a child's experience. Adults are encouraged to use a comment followed by a 'Pause and wait' when interacting with children. Different types of comments should be used.⁶ Developmentally appropriate questions can be used when children have sufficient language to understand the question.⁷*
- **Copy and Add:** *To extend children's language adults should copy back a child's action or word(s) and add a word. When using this strategy adults should use correct speech sounds and grammar, and change any non-specific words (e.g. it, that, there) to specific vocabulary.*

Words up 1 Results

Observations of practitioner's interactions were taken at the start of term 2 and at the end of term 4. The numbers of positive observations relating to the targeted six key messages in action were noted during these observations and the percentage increase was calculated as below.

	Setting 1	Setting 2	Setting 3
percentage increase in positive interactions observed	267%	75%	138%

Words Up 2 (stage 2)

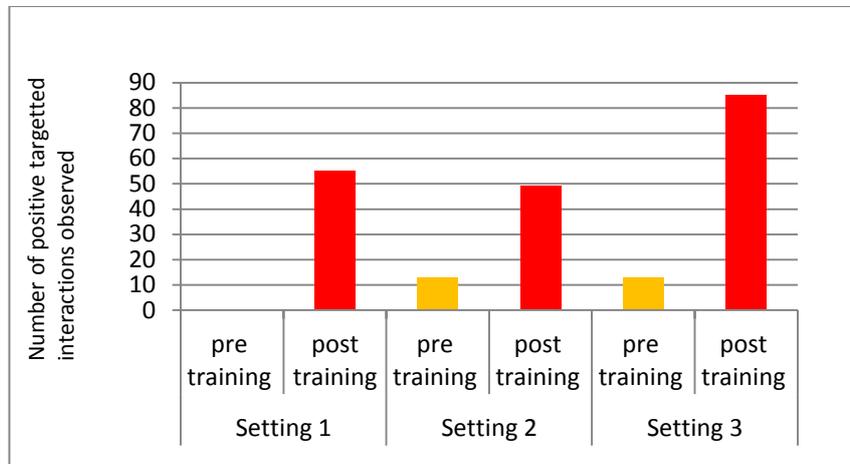
Training provided information on further implementation of the six key messages across aspects of the Early Years environment, focussing on specific strategies to support children's listening skills, adult's storytelling and song and rhyme skills in order to build on early language for emerging literacy.

Specific strategies that are focussed on in training and support are:

- **Position of Staff:** *Adults were advised to be in a position level with the children so that the 'Face-to-Face' key message could be maintained.*
- **Position of Children:** *Children should be in a small group and in a semi-circle or circle so that they are all in a position where they can see the practitioner and the book or props.*
- **Quiet Time to Talk:** *Adults should plan story or song and rhyme time at a time when there are reduced distractions in the environment.*
- **Use of Visuals: Choosing:** *adults should support children to make choices at story, and song and rhyme, time through the use of a visual choice board, song bag, or similar.*
- **Use of Visuals: Timelines:** *A visual timeline (symbols indicating the main events of the session) should be in place in the Early Stage setting to support children's understanding on the routine. Symbols should be removed once an activity has finished so that the first symbol always represents the activity the children are currently engaged in.*
- **Use of Visuals: Listening:** *Adults should support children's listening skills through the use of listening visuals indicating 'good looking' and 'good listening' and adults should reinforce these through positive praise for these behaviours alongside the visuals.*
- **Use of Props:** *Stories should be repeated at least three times in a week to allow for repetition. Story telling should be planned so that the practitioner knows the story well. Props should be used: the adult should use a few carefully chosen props to 'show' the children the vocabulary in the story and 'act out' the story to provide the children with visual 'hooks' for the vocabulary in the story.*
- **Interactive:** *Story time and Song and Rhyme time are language learning opportunities when they are interactive. When Adults use the Words Up: Early Key messages in particular 'Be Careful With Questions', 'Pause and Wait' and 'Copy and Add' during song, rhyme and story times the sessions become interactive with a balance of turns between the adult leading the session and the children taking part, enabling children to learn and practice their emerging literacy skills and early narrative skills.*

Words up 2 Results

Observations of practitioners in the targeted settings pre training, and following training and support were taken looking at use of these strategies in practice during storytelling, and song and rhyme, time with the following results.



	Setting 1	Setting 2	Setting 3
percentage increase in positive interactions observed at story time	55%	36%	72%

Results summary:

Practitioner's interactions within all three targeted SAC Early Years settings have improved through intervention during the project so far. Measurement of targeted positive interactions pre intervention and after two terms showed an increase of 267%, 75% and 138% in the three settings. Measurement of interactions during story time before and after intervention showed increases in targeted positive interactions in all three settings of 55%, 36% and 72%. These results show an extensive change in practice in all 3 settings.

Discussion:

The project has supported staff to develop self-reflection and consider the impact of interaction on the children's language, communication, interaction and behaviour. Staff are anecdotally noting positive impacts on the children's language and communication within the settings as a result of the changes to their own interaction.

[The SLT team carried out baseline language assessments on a sample of the children in the Nursery and reassessment will be completed towards the end of the project to assess the impact of the project on the children's language development.]

The project has impacted on the SLT service's learning and practice in other settings. It is clear that having agreed goals with all parties, including management and practitioners working on the setting floor, before carrying out modelling and coaching work is vital if change is going to be made. Working collaboratively with management teams is essential for sustainability to be ensured as there needs to be a shared understanding.

Collaborative working with education has led to the Words Up key message strategies being embedded within training and information delivered and provided by Education staff across the early level. Thus helping to make it part of good practice rather than stand-alone SLT advice.

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Recommendations:

- Across Highland it would be beneficial to expand the use of this programme of training in Words up followed by supported modelling and coaching. This project has had impressive results and spread to other schools is likely to reduce the attainment gap that can be created by reduced language skills. Scottish Attainment Challenge Pupil Equity Funding could potentially be used for this.
- In these settings: Current work to ensure continued impact on language and literacy for the children into the future is focussing on continuing to embed the key messages to where they become normal practice..
This is done through working collaboratively with school and area management to ensure that an emphasis on self-reflection and high quality interaction is included in education planning and evaluation. Continued measurement and assessment of this will be required.

Work is also focussing on vocabulary development across the Nursery and Primary 1 years using specific targeted programmes and the Pre-Teaching Vocabulary approach.

It would be useful to take the learning from this project and a previous PEF project to use similar techniques further up the school using the key messages for supporting language and communication learning from Words Up: Primary (aimed at P2-7).

- Alongside this project, a monitoring tool has been developed alongside education staff to support practitioners' self-reflection when implementing the 6 Words Up: Early key messages in their practice. It is in use in the three target settings and being trialled in some other settings. After feedback on this trial it is hoped that this could be used across Highland.

References:

- ¹ Scottish Government: (launched February 2015): Scottish Attainment Challenge
<https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/pupil-attainment/>
- ² James Law, Jenna Charlton, Kirsten Asmussen (2017: Early Intervention Foundation): Language as Wellbeing Indicator
- ³ Rachel Romeo et al: (February 2018): Beyond the 30 Million Word Gap Children's Conversational Exposure Is Associated With Language-Related Brain Function
- ⁴ Highland Council, Speech and Language Therapy: Words Up
<https://bumps2bairns.com/what-to-expect-language/>
<https://highlandliteracy.com/words-up-key-messages/>
- ⁵ Scottish Government: (January 2016): Ready to Act - A transformational plan for Children and young people, their parents, carers and families who require support from allied health professionals (AHPs)
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/ready-act-transformational-plan-children-young-people-parents-carers-families/>
- ⁶ Using comments. Highland Council Emerging Literacy Website.
<https://highlandliteracy.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/making-comments.pdf>
- ⁷ Question Steps. Highland Council Emerging Literacy Website.
<https://highlandliteracy.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/question-steps.pdf>